

DISCOVERY OF A RUFIOUS NIGHT HERON ROOKERY IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

by Richard W. Braithwaite* & Johnny A Estbergs*

Rufous Night Herons (*Nycticorax caledonicus*) are common birds throughout Australia. Although immature birds have been frequently recorded in the Northern Territory (eg. Sedgwick, 1947), to our knowledge, no rookeries have been recorded for this area.

A large rookery of Rufous Night Herons was discovered in rainforest north of Mt. Hooper near the mouth of the South Alligator River. The vegetation is relatively simple structurally with the canopy stratum at 15 metres with a projected cover of 68% and a ground stratum at one metre varying between 4 and 26% projected cover. 46 species of plants were recorded on the rainforest site which was on well-drained calcareous sandy soil.

The rookery is not visible from the air as the nests are generally in the lower canopy and obscured by foliage from above. The rookery was about 400 by 200 metres and it is estimated that as many as 2000 birds were nesting.

On the evenings of March 17 and 18, 1981, when we visited the site, large numbers of birds were seen flying east. From our vantage point to the south-east of the rookery, all birds were flying in the one direction; suggesting they were feeding some distance from the rookery.

At the time of our visit, the nests mostly contained half-grown young. There were also small numbers of birds on eggs and a few large feathered chicks. On two occasions individuals were seen flying with nesting materials. Thus our visit appeared to coincide with the middle of the nesting season. During an earlier visit on

December 8 and 9, 1980, the area was not recognisable as a rookery. Most nests from the previous year had fallen apart and no Night-Herons were present. These observations concur with those of Frith (1976) that rufous (Nankeen) Night-Herons breed in the summer wet season in the tropical north. Unlike many rookeries, there were no other species of Herons using the rookery.

As this species is likely to be very sensitive to human disturbance, it is fortunate that the site is rather inaccessible. Because of a thick fringe of mangroves, the site is inaccessible by sea and its position is so far from roads of any description that land access is extremely difficult. Consequently it is hoped the site will continue to experience minimal disturbance for the foreseeable future.

These observations were made with the financial assistance of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service through the Kakadu Fauna Survey Consultancy Agreements.

REFERENCES

- FRITH, H.J. (Ed) (1976) "Reader's Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds". Reader's Digest Services, Sydney.
- SEDGWICK, (1947) Northern Territory E.H. bird notes. *Emu* 46:294-308.

* CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research,
PMB 44,
Winnellie, N.T. 5789